

# “Checkmate on the Northern Front”

## *The Deployment of Task Force 1-63 Armor In Support of Operation Iraqi Freedom*

by Major Brian Maddox

### Strategic Chess Match

Chess is a game of strategy where an indirect approach is often more valuable than overt strength. A skilled player deliberately maneuvers to eliminate his opponent's options and then, at the right time, boldly moves toward the objective — checkmate. During March and April 2003, coalition and U.S. military planners crafted a strategy for Northern Iraq worthy of a gifted chess master. At stake in this “game” was the defeat of Iraqi forces north of Kirkuk and coalition control of the critically important Kirkuk oil fields.

Diplomatic differences with a newly elected Turkish government prevented the planned deployment of a large coalition force to open a second “Northern Front” in Iraq. Military planners turned to a different option that relied more on finesse and flexibility to accomplish

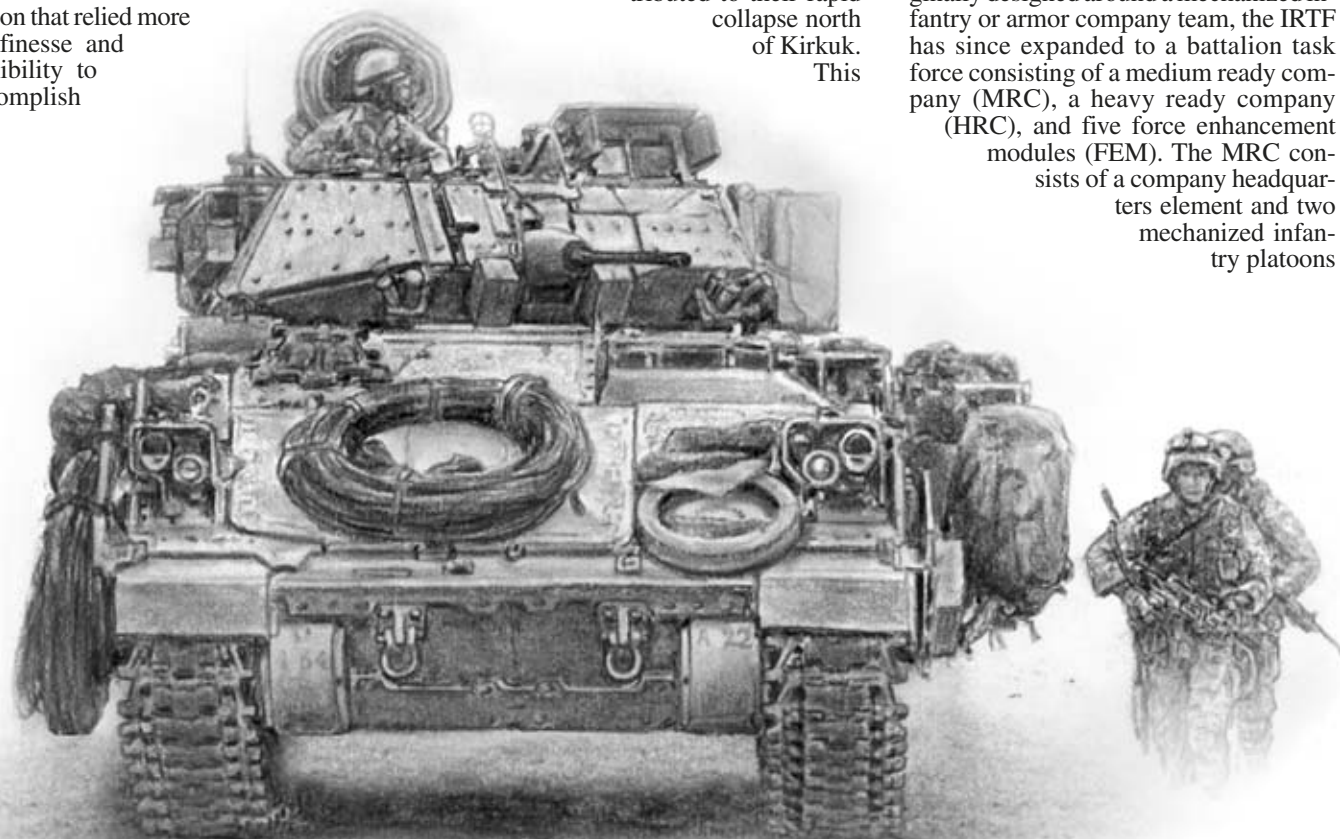
stated objectives. This strategy involved a diverse group of forces and organizations that included national intelligence agencies, conventional U.S. Army and Air Force units, Special Operations Forces, and Kurdish Pesh Merga fighters. One of the conventional units involved in this campaign in Northern Iraq was the 1st Battalion, 63d (1-63) Armor, 3d Brigade, 1st Infantry Division, Vilseck, Germany.

The air deployment of Task Force (TF) 1-63 Armor to Iraq in April 2003 played an essential role in the success of the Northern Front. TF 1-63 Armor's deployment demonstrated that the United States could project a viable heavy armor force anywhere in the world. The mere presence of U.S. armor in Northern Iraq weakened the resolve of defending Iraqi forces in the region and contributed to their rapid collapse north of Kirkuk. This

article outlines TF 1-63 Armor's unique organization, briefly describes the unit's actions in Northern Iraq, and provides lessons learned from this historic deployment.

### Background and Organization of the Immediate Ready Task Force

TF 1-63 Armor deployed to Northern Iraq as the U.S. Army Europe (USAREUR) Immediate Ready Task Force (IRTF). The IRTF is a unique organization with an unusual organizational structure. Born in the wake of Task Force Hawk, the USAREUR IRTF was designed and equipped to accomplish a wide range of short-notice missions. In 1998, USAREUR identified the requirement for an armor force capable of deploying rapidly anywhere in the European Command (EUCOM) area of operations (AOR). Originally designed around a mechanized infantry or armor company team, the IRTF has since expanded to a battalion task force consisting of a medium ready company (MRC), a heavy ready company (HRC), and five force enhancement modules (FEM). The MRC consists of a company headquarters element and two mechanized infantry platoons

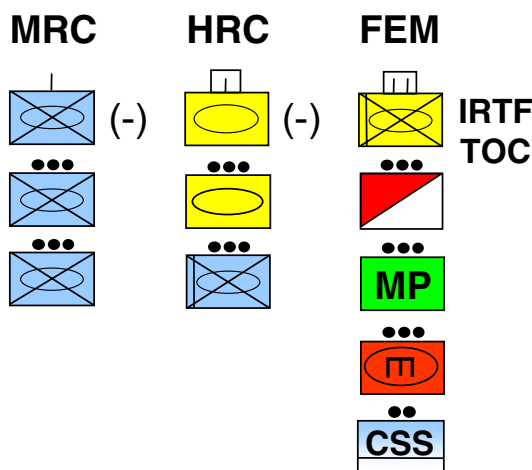


equipped with M113A3s and four dismounted infantry squads. The HRC consists of one M1A1 Abrams platoon and one M2 Bradley platoon with two dismounted infantry squads. An additional M1A1 or M2 serves as the HRC commander's vehicle.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to the HRC and the MRC, five supporting FEMs provide the IRTF commander with the force multipliers needed to accomplish various missions. For example, the command and control FEM consists of two modified M997 ambulances equipped with an array of communications and computer equipment. These vehicles provide the IRTF commander a highly mobile tactical operations center (TOC) capable of planning and tracking armor operations. The four remaining FEMs consisting of combat service support assets, engineers, military police, and scouts complete the IRTF's organization. Each FEM is air deployable and capable of supporting task force-level operations or, with proper support, limited independent operations.

The IRTF was not originally designed to deploy or operate independently. The IRTF was created to provide a light infantry organization with a viable armor capability. In the EUCOM AOR, units serving as the IRTF often trained with the 173d Airborne Brigade based in Vicenza, Italy. This brigade provides a lethal, highly mobile infantry force, but lacks a heavy armor punch. The IRTF is designed to provide that armor punch. A series of successful training exercises conducted at the Combat Maneuver Training Center, Hohenfels, Germany, and training deployments to Hungary and Poland in which various IRTF units trained with the 173d Brigade, cemented a successful working relationship in a training environment. In Northern Iraq, TF 1-63 Armor and the 173d Brigade validated this relationship during combat operations.

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**Figure 1. IRTF Organization**

### Bashur Landing and Operations in Northern Iraq

Early morning 8 April 2003, the first M1A1 Abrams tank drove off the back ramp of an Air Force C-17 at Bashur Air Field in Northern Iraq. This was the first time an M1A1 had air landed in support of a combat operation. The task force operations officer arrived on the ground with the first M1A1 and began to coordinate the arrival of the rest of the task force.

The task force commander's plan was to first deploy the HRC's tank platoon, an M88 recovery vehicle, and small command and control elements to quickly get an organized force on the ground capable of conducting and sustaining combat operations. By 10 April, the situation in the vicinity of Kirkuk began to change

rapidly. Kurdish Pesh Merga fighters continued to press their attacks against Iraqi forces defending north of the city.

The 173d Brigade commander believed the time was ripe for a concerted move on Irbil. The task force commander arrived at Bashur at approximately 0300 hours on the morning of 10 April and immediately received a verbal warning order to be ready to move south in three hours. At that time, TF 1-63 Armor had five M1A1 tanks and two M2 Bradleys on the ground at Bashur. No recovery or maintenance assets had yet arrived. TF 1-63 Armor soldiers hurriedly finished off-loading the last of

the vehicles to arrive and began to prepare for offensive operations.

The task force commander decided to assume risk and prepare to move what force he had toward Irbil. The commander believed that the mere movement of an armored force south toward Irbil and Kirkuk would provide coalition forces an important psychological advantage. Intelligence reports indicated that Iraqi forces, dug in north of Kirkuk, did not expect to encounter American armor moving from the north. Even a small armored force moving from Bashur might convince the Iraqis to abandon their defenses. Likewise, Kurdish Pesh Merga fighters, energized by the presence of armored vehicles, could press home their attacks against Iraqi positions.







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For over a decade, Kurdish fighters struggled against Saddam Hussein's regime with antiquated small arms and home-made artillery and explosives. The Kurds fought valiantly, but they lacked the heavy weapons to defeat Iraqi forces dug in and supported by artillery. For days, Kurds wondered when the tanks would arrive.<sup>2</sup>

Prior to the arrival of the main body of TF 1-63 Armor at Bashur, the task force operations officer and the liaison officer conducted leader's reconnaissance of two possible routes to Irbil and Kirkuk. The liaison officer traveled the direct route down Highway 3 to a point just North of Irbil. Any forces traveling this route could secure the Irbil airfield and if necessary skirt the western edge of Irbil and continue south on Highway 2 toward Kirkuk. This route had two advantages: it was

suitable for armored vehicle traffic, and it allowed coalition forces to use the Irbil airfield to stage future operations to the south.

The disadvantage of the Irbil route was that it led right into the teeth of the Iraqi defenses north of Kirkuk. Forces moving south along this route must travel through a wide valley with steep rolling hills. The imposing Kani Domlan Ridgeline dominates the southern edge of this valley. Iraqi infantry and artillery positioned on this key terrain continued to hold this ground despite weeks of heavy bombing by coalition aircraft and attacks by Pesh Merga fighters and U.S. Special Operations Forces. Forces moving along this route would also have to cross the Little Zab River at the town of Altun Kupri. Local Pesh Merga reported that Iraqi in-

fantry occupying a small stone castle on the east side of the river heavily defended Altun Kupri. Intelligence reports indicated that these troops would strongly resist any effort to dislodge them.

The liaison officer and the task force operations officer also conducted reconnaissance on an eastern indirect approach route south toward Kirkuk. This route winds southeast of Bashur through small villages and numerous narrow mountain switchbacks to the town of Taqtaq located on the Little Zab River. The advantage of this route was that it avoided the strength of the Iraqi positions along the Kani Domlan Ridge.

Approximately 10 kilometers north of Kirkuk, there is a gap in the ridgeline where a small tributary of the Little Zab



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River flows into Kirkuk. The commander of the 173d Brigade referred to this gap as the "sweet spot." He believed that if the route was trafficable for armored vehicles, he could use the gap in the Kani Domlan to envelop the Iraqi positions on the ridgeline to the northwest.

The route south from Taqtaq was not suitable for armored vehicle traffic, unfortunately. Several of the bridges along the route were incapable of supporting Abrams tanks. Additionally, road conditions deteriorated significantly south of Taqtaq. Unimproved mountain roads and narrow village streets greatly restricted armored vehicle mobility. This route was, however, suitable for lighter vehicles and was used by the 2d Battalion, 503d Infantry (2-503d) during their attack on Kirkuk. The success of this operation validated the 173d brigade commander's analysis of Iraqi defenses and his desire to exploit key terrain to defeat a potentially strong enemy position.

At approximately 0600 hours on 10 April 2003, TF 1-63 Armor began its movement to Irbil. The brigade's mission was to conduct a reconnaissance in force in the vicinity of Irbil to demonstrate coalition resolve in Northern Iraq.<sup>3</sup> The brigade commander learned that Pesh Merga planned to attack Iraqi forces located in Altun Kupri. This accelerated the brigade's movement timeline. The brigade commander assigned 1st Battalion, 508th Infantry (1-508th) the mission to move along Highway 3 to Irbil and support the Pesh Merga attack on Altun Kupri. The 1-508th would also secure tactical assembly area (TAA) Boston located to the west of the Irbil Airfield. From TAA Boston, the 1-508th, if needed, could conduct reconnaissance to the west and determine the location and strength of any Iraqi forces moving east from Mosul. TF 1-63 Armor's mission was to follow

1-508th to Irbil and occupy TAA Boston. The task force would then prepare for future combat operations.

During the movement to Irbil, the soldiers of TF 1-63 Armor experienced a mixture of emotions. The tension and wariness of moving south toward an enemy defending in unknown strength stood in sharp contrast to the overwhelmingly friendly and joyous reception that greeted the task force as it moved toward Irbil. Elated Kurds greeted soldiers with flowers and embraces as they passed by. Large banners with "welcome to the liberation army" greeted the armored troops as the long column of vehicles snaked toward the south.

When TF 1-63 Armor reached Irbil, the cost of conducting a 50-kilometer road march, without any heavy maintenance and logistics support, hit home with a vengeance. Two of the M1A1s had major problems that required considerable time to repair. The task force commander faced the difficult decision to push on with the limited combat power remaining or wait for the sustainment package, which was scheduled to arrive in the next 24 to 36 hours. The task force commander decided to see how the situation developed involving 1-508th operation near Altun Kupri. He was prepared to support the 508th with what combat power he had available, if necessary. If the 1-508th was successful in their mission without armored support, TF 1-63 Armor could build combat power and prepare for follow-on operations in Kirkuk.

## Deployment of TF 1-63 AR

	7 APR	8 APR	9 APR	10 APR	11 APR	12 APR
	CHALK 1 1 X C-17 1 X M1 (1)	CHALK 4 1 X C-17 1 X M1 (2)	CHALKS 2 & 5 2 X C-17 1 X M1 (3) 1 X M2 (1) 1 X HMMWV (1) 2 X AMB (2) 1 X TRL	CHALKS 3, 6, & 16 3 X C-17 2 X M1 (5) 1 X M2 (2) 1 X M113 (1) 1 X HMMWV (2)	CHALKS 7, 8, 9, 14, 10, & 11 6 X C-17 2 X M2 (4) 6 X M113 (7) 1 X M88 (1) 10 X HMMWV (12) 1 X TRUCK (1) 2 X HEMTT (2)	CHALKS 12 & 18 2 X C-17 1 X M2 (5) 3 X M113 (10) 4 X HMMWV (16) 1 X HEMTT (3) 2 X TRUCK (3)
13 APR	14 APR	15 APR	16 APR	17 APR	18 APR	19 APR
CHALKS 13, 14, & 17 3 X C-17 1 X M113 (11) 3 X HMMWV (19) 2 X HEMTT (5) 1 X TRUCK (4)	CHALKS 20 & 21 2 X C-17 3 X M1064 (3) 1 X HMMWV (20) 2 X HEMTT (7)	CHALK 22 1 X C-17 1 X M113 (12) 1 X M1064 (4) 3 X HMMWV (23)	SCT CHALK 1 1 X C-17 5 X HMMWV (28)	MP CHALK 1 1 X C-17 7 X HMMWV (35) 2 X TRL (3)		MP CHALK 2 1 X C-17 2 X HMMWV (37) 1 X PLS (1) 1 X TRL (4)
TOTAL NUMBER OF VEHICLES						
CBT VEH		SPT VEH		AIRCRAFT USED		
5 X M1 5 X M2 12 X M113 4 X M1064		1 X M88 37 X HMMWV 7 X HEMTT 4 X TRUCK 2 X AMB 4 X TRAILER 1 X PLS		24 X C-17		

Figure 2. Actual Airflow of TF 1-63 Armor



The task force commander's decision was difficult, but it paid long-term dividends during initial support and stability operations in Kirkuk. The Pesh Merga assault on Altun Kupri was successful and led to the ultimate collapse of Iraqi forces defending in and around Kirkuk. The 1-508th and the 2-503d followed in short order and secured the strategically important Kirkuk oil fields. TF 1-63 Armor entered Kirkuk with the combat power and sustainment needed to conduct stability operations. The task force successfully accomplished the strategic objective of providing an armor presence in Kirkuk to demonstrate coalition resolve and deter Iraq's neighbors in the region from attempting to gain control of the Kirkuk oil fields.

### Lessons Learned

During the deployment of TF 1-63 Armor in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom, task force leaders learned several key lessons for future air deployment of armor forces. These lessons learned primarily deal with deployment preparation and execution, task organization, and operational employment.

The austere configuration of the IRTF does not allow its structure to be reduced without severely degrading its capabilities. The task organization contains a limited amount of combat power, command and control assets, and logistics to function operationally. Any reductions in this configuration can cause the IRTF to be combat ineffective in a high-intensity conflict (HIC) environment.

Due to limited airflow, it took over two weeks for the IRTF to deploy to Northern Iraq. This piecemeal approach reduced the combat effectiveness of the organization until more assets arrived in theater. The IRTF needs to flow as an entire force over a relatively short time. This ensures that all command and control and support assets are in place to support the limited combat systems.

If the IRTF is to be deployed for future HIC operations, the combat power of the organization should be increased to include two additional heavy platoons — one M1A1 platoon and one M2 platoon. This would enable the HRC to operate as a tank-heavy team with two M1A1 platoons and one M2 platoon, and the MRC to operate as a mechanized infantry team with two M113 platoons and one M2 platoon. Without this added combat power, the capabilities and firepower of the MRC are severely limited with only M113s. If one task organizes the M2 platoon to support the MRC, the HRC is left with only one tank platoon. These two additional

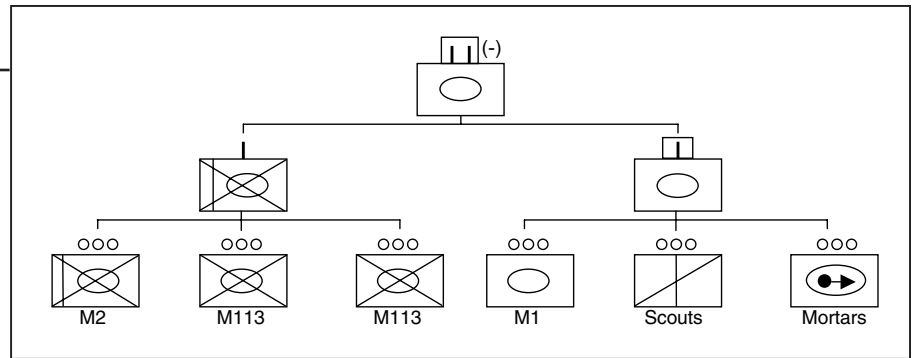


Figure 3. Actual Task Organization used by TF 1-63 AR

platoons allow the HRC and MRC to operate as true company teams and both maintain sufficient combat power to operate in an HIC environment.

When TF 1-63 Armor deployed to Operation Iraqi Freedom, the commander task organized to balance the firepower and mobility between the HRC and the MRC. The task organization in Figure 3 was in effect for the majority of missions in Northern Iraq. Without such a balanced task organization, the two company commanders would have been unable to resource the troops to tasks assigned.

Once fully deployed, there is great temptation to break apart the IRTF and attach its assets to light airborne units, thus significantly increasing the firepower of each light element. This technique, however, does not afford the brigade commander the shock effect and combat power of a heavy task force to react to armored threats.

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Even during support operations and stability operations, the IRTF was a very effective resource to project coalition resolve and provide overwhelming presence at trouble spots. The IRTF is best used as a separate heavy force capable of rapidly reacting to armored or mechanized threats. The task force commander often stated "don't task us for equipment, give me the task and we will accomplish the mission."<sup>4</sup>

In summary, TF 1-63 Armor's deployment to Northern Iraq validated the concept of deploying an armored force by air anywhere in the world. The M1A1 Abrams and the M2 Bradley are powerful symbols of America's military power. The ability to deploy these systems by air

provides a tremendous psychological edge and credible combat power to light units.

During Operation Iraqi Freedom, TF 1-63 Armor demonstrated that armor and mechanized forces work well with Special Operations Forces and light infantry units in remote environments. The U.S. Army must continue to work with its sister services to ensure that we develop the joint capabilities to transport and sustain heavy forces to future battlefields. One Special Operations soldier operating near the town of Taqtaq put it in plain language: "We have done all that we can do. We've bombed these guys for three weeks. We need tanks and heavy infantry to drive them off the ridge." Unthinkable? Not anymore — checkmate.



### Notes

<sup>1</sup>If a mechanized company is assigned to the HRC mission, the commander's vehicle is an M2.

<sup>2</sup>One Special Operations soldier working with a group of Pesh Merga outside the village of Taqtaq reported that the Kurds wanted to know when the Big Red One would arrive.

<sup>3</sup>Operations Order Brief for Operation Bayonet Deterrence, 2 April 2003.

<sup>4</sup>Concerning the integration of heavy and light forces, there were occasions where the IRTF placed platoon-sized elements under the operational control of the light battalions. The armored protection and additional firepower provided by the heavy unit nearly doubled the capability of the light unit (platoon or company) to which they were attached.

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